

California's First Lady Maria Shriver

Champion of Guard Support and Volunteer Service

by Keith Kawasaki

"We all need fuel for our soul. Your soul is filled and your heart is filled when you do something that makes another person feel needed and of value; and that in turn makes you feel needed and of value. And at the end of day, that's really what our lives are about . . . I find when I reach out, it fills me. I would think that anybody who is feeling a bit disconnected, a bit empty . . . I think if he or she found some way to be needed through service that feeling might dissipate." —Maria Shriver, First Lady of the State of California

GX recently had the honor of speaking with the First Lady of California, Maria Shriver, in regard to her work supporting California's Soldiers and families, as well as the importance of volunteer efforts.

Since becoming First Lady in 2003, Shriver has developed two standout military support programs: The Military Family Initiative and The Heroic Family program.

The **Military Family Initiative** connects families of deployed Soldiers, via the internet, with citizens willing to volunteer their support. Similar to the First Lady of Minnesota Mary Pawlenty's efforts (GX 3.3), this online program is hosted at the First Lady's Web site (www.firstlady.ca.gov) and can, for example, help a Guard wife find a free lawn service or volunteer babysitters—simple everyday things that can add up to major stress, both financially and emotionally.

The **Heroic Family program** (www.heroicfamilies.org) provides phone cards for Soldiers to communicate with loved ones back home. "[T]hat idea came from a [Soldier]," said Shriver. "I said to him, 'How can I help?' And he said, 'It would be a really big help if you could just get us phone cards.' Through the effort, every \$15 donation goes toward pre-paid phone service for a deployed California service member."

"The goal is that I'm trying to make 37 million people aware that we have a huge military population who's loved ones are overseas, who struggle here at home—struggle with paying bills, with family responsibilities; kids struggle without a father or mother," said Shriver. "There are little things that we can all do that make a huge difference in their lives and helps the time pass."

Shriver takes time to personally talk with the citizens of California, discovering what exactly their needs are and how best to accommodate them. Likewise, Shriver has worked to understand the modern, military family experience and continually seeks ways to make it easier. One is by uniting Californians who are willing to help carry that burden with the families.

"To me, the military story is such a multi-faceted story," said Shriver. "It's a story of patriotism and service and duty, but it can become a story of disabilities and emotional issues, marital issues and family dysfunction. All these things affect the military in ways I think so many people aren't really aware of."

To get to the heart of military needs, Shriver held a meeting in March of 2005 with spouses, parents, and children of the 579th Engineer Battalion (CAARNG) at the State Capital. The 579th had recently endured an 18-month deployment in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"Just trying to find out from them what I could be doing, what the Governor could be doing," said Shriver. "Were there certain things they were struggling with? Was there anything that I should know

that we didn't know or didn't do?"

"When I was in high school there was a draft, so it was quite a big issue when I was in, what I would call, my formative years," continued Shriver. "So, I've always been interested in military families and the price they pay. My father is a Veteran of WWII. He was in the Navy; my uncles were in the war. I'm interested because the families serve, too. Regardless of your position on the war, we can all do things that support families who defend our country. Even if you are not in favor of the war, you can be in favor of showing compassion to families who are struggling and alone. I feel like there's always so much more I could be doing."

In fact, Shriver welcomes California's military families to help her brainstorm new ideas. She invites family members to log on to www.firstlady.ca.gov and write her directly. "I'm very interested to hear from military families on what more I should be doing. I'd love for them to write to me! I'd like to broaden the Heroic Families program and hear more about what I can do."

As evidenced by not only her military support efforts but also her backing on countless other causes, including Alzheimer's, Special Olympics, California Service Corps and Best Buddies, it is clear Shriver bears a remarkable passion for service and has dedicated her life to aiding others with pure volunteer spirit. Californians can thank her parents for that.

"I was raised with the understanding that [volunteering is] a duty—like certain people are raised in military families and it's something that they continue, that sort of family calling, so to speak. In my family, you're raised to get up and get going, to be involved. You don't dare come home unless you're involved. That was the way I was raised and that's what my parents did. Really, service is—as Chairwoman of the California Service Corps, I call it—fuel for the soul . . . We all need, in a very disjointed, disconnected world, fuel in our soul." **GX**

VOLUNTEER SPIRIT First Lady Maria Shriver takes time with members of the military.

